
DENTAL HEALTH FACT SHEET

SMOKELESS TOBACCO

What it is and how it is used:

There are two kinds of smokeless tobacco (also called "spit" tobacco): chewing and snuff tobacco. These are known as "chew" and "snuff", respectively. Chewing tobacco is a plug, bar, or twist form of leaf tobacco usually sold in a "pouch." Chewing tobacco is placed in a wad (also called a chaw or quid) inside the cheek and sucked. Snuff is dark cured tobacco, which has been fine cut. Moist snuff is most common in the U.S. and is sold in small round "tins." A "pinch" or "dip" of tobacco is placed between the cheek and gum where it stimulates the flow of saliva and mixes with it. Some of the tobacco juices trickle down the user's throat and are swallowed in spite of constant spitting.

What it does:

Smokeless tobacco contains most of the same harmful chemicals as smoking tobacco. The difference is that the chemicals in smokeless tobacco are absorbed into the body through the lining of the mouth, throat, and stomach rather than the lungs. Smokeless tobacco has 10 times the amount of some cancer-causing substances as smoking tobacco.

The nicotine in smokeless tobacco results in:

- Addiction: Nicotine produces temporary alertness, usually followed by tiredness or irritability -- an "up" then a "down."
- Narrowing of the blood vessels making it more difficult for the heart to get oxygen to the body.
- Increased heart rate and blood pressure.

These changes decrease athletic performance. Eventually they can cause heart disease and death.

Smokeless tobacco can cause cancer of the mouth and throat:

- Users have 6-28¹ times the risk of developing cancer as non-users.
- About 30,000 people per year develop oral cancer (mouth, lip, tongue). About three-quarters of these are due to heavy use of alcohol and tobacco.
- Prolonged exposure in the same area of the mouth increases risk.
- Rough white patches called leukoplakia often appear on the inside of the mouth and can turn to cancer.
- Leukoplakia will usually disappear about two weeks after use stops. If it does not, see a physician or dentist.
- The warning signs of cancer, such as leukoplakia or sores that don't heal, can be seen easily and can be cured if caught early.

¹ Williams & Wilkins, *Guide to Clinical Preventive Services* – Report of the U.S. Preventive Services Taskforce, HHS, 1996 (Updated version).

Other effects of smokeless tobacco include:

- Discoloration of teeth (this can be permanent)
- Bad breath
- Decreased ability to taste or smell
- Mouth sores
- Gum disease: when the gums are irritated by tobacco they recede, increasing the chances of tooth loss
- Tooth decay: smokeless tobacco contains sugar, which decays teeth like any other sugar
- Spitting: users periodically need to spit out brown juice

Laws:

In 1986, new laws banned advertising of smokeless tobacco in the media and required warning labels. The text of warning labels is as follows:

- This product is not a safe alternative to cigarettes.
- This product may cause gum disease and tooth loss.
- This product may cause mouth cancer.

It is illegal to sell smokeless tobacco and other tobacco products to anyone under the age of 18.

Policy:

Minor league baseball banned the use of smokeless and smoking tobacco in 1993. "We're addressing our concerns both for the health of baseball personnel and the image they may portray." (Dick Wagner, assistant to the chairman of the Executive Council).

Reference:

National Institutes of Health, National Cancer Institute, Smokeless Tobacco or Health, An International Perspective, September 1992.